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Examining Communication and Social Interaction Skills in a Project Management Course

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Project management requires communication and social interaction skills to motivate people to work together and work towards project goals. Communication is necessary for informing about the project phases, as well as, inspiring people to action (Tonnquist, 2014). It is important that the people communicate effectively with each other while working in various settings and project teams for high performance (Erickson & Dyer, 2004; Rickards & Moger, 2000). Wheelan (1997) discusses group interaction through forming – storming – norming – performing (Tuckman, 1965) in relation to the development of effective teams. Group and organizational culture plays a significant role in facilitating integration of knowledge and the development of effective procedures to achieve goals (Newell, Tansley & Huang, 2004).

Project management education in universities often deal with the development of knowledge and technical skills related to project management. Pant & Baroudi (2008), for example, argues how education in project management puts more emphasis on “hard” technical skills and less focus on ”soft”, people-oriented skills. Soft skills have been viewed as more difficult to teach (Yen, Lee, & Koh, 2001). The authors of this paper view the importance of both types of skills in project management and thus, have attempted to deal with the development and assessment of soft skills. Besides affirming the need for both types of skills in project management, another reason for putting equal emphasis on soft skills is its congruence with the following national goals for a bachelor’s degree in occupational therapy (Högskoleförordning, 1993:100):

- Show ability for teamwork and collaboration with other professionals (Sw. transl. visa förmåga till lagarbete och samverkan med andra yrkesgrupper)
- Show self-awareness and empathic ability (Sw. transl. visa självkännedom och empatisk förmåga)
- Show ability for professional approach towards clients... and other groups (Sw. transl. visa förmåga till ett professionellt förhållningssätt gentemot klienter... och andra grupper)

The purpose of this paper is to present an example on teaching and assessing communication and social interaction skills in a project management course.

The Occupational therapist as a supervisor, entrepreneur, and leader (Sw. transl. Arbetsterapeuten som handledare, entreprenör och ledare) is a 15-ECTS course offered in the fifth semester of the three-year Bachelor of Science in Occupational Therapy program at Umeå University. The course was offered for the first time in the Fall term 2014. The course aims to develop professionalism, and students learn to reflect on their identity as an occupational therapist and on various roles they can take on in their work, e.g., coach, project leader. Part of the course requirements is to work in small groups and manage a short-term project related to promotion of the profession.

The development of more technical project management skills is reflected in an expected learning outcome (ELO) – the student shall, with a professional approach and in a group, initiate, plan, implement and evaluate an occupation-focused project within a given timeframe (Sw. transl. med ett professionellt förhållningssätt, initiera, planera, implementera och utvärdera ett aktivitetsfokuserat projekt i grupp inom givna tidsramar). To place equal emphasis on soft skills, an ELO – the student shall promote/strengthen communication and social interaction skills of others (Sw. transl. främja/stärka kommunikation och samspelsförmågor hos andra) was also formulated.

Pedagogical methods
To prepare students to satisfy the soft-skills ELO, one pedagogic approach is to intertwine theoretical discourse with practical exercises (based on Gagne, 1985). Students are expected to lead a project for a period of about 6 weeks, and in the same period, participate in classes covering concepts such as leadership, project management, group processes, and communication. To exemplify, a class on goal formulation includes some theoretical background, exercises related to formulating goals in their own projects, and receiving/giving feedback on the goals that were formulated. Another class on coaching and supervision would include models on how to give/formulate instructions feedback and questions, with exercises in pair or groups. Moreover, students are given opportunities to present information about their projects, to facilitate discussions about projects, and to receive and give specific feedback (Cooperrider, 2005; Øiestad, 2005) in weekly working seminars. Two teachers collaborate in the course and serve as role models for the students (Lassonde, 2010). In case of
problems within a group, teachers lead a discussion and manage the conflict among affected students. After the project, the students also participate in reflection seminars in which students discuss their project, in terms of both results and the process (Baptiste & Solomon, 2005).

According to Bryson & Hand (2007), students perceive teachers putting effort into developing relationships and trust positively influence student engagement. By taking turns in presenting and facilitating in working seminars and having exercises in class, the likelihood of free-riding, which could be detrimental to building trust, is minimized (Hall & Buzwell, 2013). Teachers in this course strive to create environments wherein students can feel comfortable giving and receiving feedback, while at the same time, demand high standard in student performances. The teachers are also aware that there are many challenges to overcome when using feedback as a tool for learning (Jonsson, 2013).
Table 1. Examples of criteria used to assess students’ ability to promote/strengthen communication and social interaction skills among others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>++</th>
<th>+</th>
<th>-</th>
<th>0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The student gives clear and timely feedback consistently. Utöver ger studenten tydlig och lämplig feedback på ett konsekvent sätt.</td>
<td>The student gives clear and timely feedback to another person about a behavior (a concrete event) or an idea, its consequences and suggestions for improvement. Studenten ger tydlig feedback vid en lämplig tid till en annan person om ett beteende (en konkret händelse) eller idé, dess konsekvenser och förbättringsförslag.</td>
<td>The student gives feedback in a unclear or inadequate way most of the time. Studenten ger feedback för det mesta på ett otydligt/bristfälligt sätt.</td>
<td>The student does not give feedback even when necessary. Studenten ger inte feedback när det behövs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student poses questions that lead to further reflection or positive action in others. Utöver ställer studenten frågor som leder till vidare reflektion eller positiv handling hos mottagaren (t.ex. hypotetiska och beteendepåverkande frågor).</td>
<td>The student poses questions that are relevant to the discussion and in an appropriate manner. Studenten ställer frågor som är relevanta till diskussionen och på ett lämpligt sätt (t.ex. orienterings- och relationsfrågor).</td>
<td>The student poses questions that are irrelevant or in a unclear or inadequate way most of the time. Studenten ställer frågor för det mesta som är irrelevanta eller på ett otydligt/bristfälligt sätt.</td>
<td>The student does not ask question even when necessary. Studenten ställer inte frågor när det behövs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student responds appropriately to feedback on ideas in a consistently way. Studenten tar emot feedback om idéer på ett lämpligt och konsekvent sätt.</td>
<td>The student responds appropriately to feedback on actions or ideas. Studenten tar emot feedback om ett beteende eller en idé på ett lämpligt sätt (t.ex. förstår och sedan förändrar eller förkastar).</td>
<td>The student responds inappropriately to feedback on actions or ideas. Studenten tar emot feedback om ett beteende eller en idé på ett bristfälligt sätt (t.ex. går i försvar, förnekar eller förklarar bort).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student engages others in a discussion on group ideas/ relevant topics. Utöver engagerar studenten andra studenter i diskussion om gruppidéer/relevant ämne.</td>
<td>The student contributes to a discussion on group ideas/ relevant topics. Studenten bidrar till diskussionen om gruppidéer/relevant ämne.</td>
<td>The student contributes to or engages others in a discussion on mostly irrelevant topics. Studenten bidrar till diskussionen i stor del med ovidkommande ämnen eller engagerar andra studenter i diskussion i stor del om ovidkommande ämnen.</td>
<td>The student does not contribute to nor engages others in a discussion. Studenten bidrar inte till diskussionen eller engagerar inte andra studenter i diskussion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“++” means that the student can meet a particular criterion at a highly satisfactory level. “+” means that the student can meet a particular criterion at a satisfactory level. “-” means that student needs improvement in the particular area. “0” means that a particular behavior was not present or observed.
References